Race is on for museums to host retired space shuttles

May 27 2010, by Virginie Montet

Space Shuttle Atlantis lands on May 26 at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida. US museums are wasting no time in jostling to showcase the three retiring space shuttles after Atlantis touched down on Earth this week, capping the last scheduled mission of its 25-year career.

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"No doubt the competition is fierce," said Bill Moore, chief operating officer of the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex in Florida.

His institution is among some 21 others competing to preserve and exhibit the Atlantis, Discovery or Endeavour space shuttles.

The trio is being retired after President Barack Obama opted not to fund

a successor program, deciding instead to encourage private spacecraft development.

NASA has announced it would seek to preserve the space shuttles for the historical record about a year after Endeavour's last scheduled flight in November, unless the orbiters's missions are extended.

While the US space agency has already offered Discovery to the National Air and Space Museum, a decision has not yet been made on where the other two shuttles will be placed upon retirement, NASA spokesman John Yembrick told AFP.

Discovery is the oldest of the group, having completed 39 missions in space.

Museums are pushing and shoving to be first in line to land the prestigious opportunity to show the awe-inspiring spacecraft.

At least 20 proposals have been submitted so far and about half of those were "really strong," said Valerie Neal, curator of the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum.

The National Museum of the US Air Force is among the candidates for this "lottery," with its eye squarely set on Atlantis.

Eighteen astronauts wrote a letter to NASA Administrator Charles Bolden requesting that the shuttle be housed at the US Air Force, which they noted was "instrumental in the design, development, funding and approval of the space shuttle program."

The petitioners included Charles Duke, who walked on the moon during the Apollo 16 mission, and the first woman to walk on the Earth's natural satellite, Kathryn Sullivan.

New York City's Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum is also vying for consideration, along with NASA's two visitor centers, the Johnson Space Center in Texas and Kennedy in Florida, which is said to be favored to reclaim Atlantis.

The Adler Planetarium in Chicago and Seattle's Museum of Flight also have high hopes, despite a pricey entry ticket of no less than 28.8 million dollars for shipping and handling alone.

"That's the price tag basically for every museum... I like to say that the orbiter itself is free," joked Neal.

While high, the fee was lowered from an initial 42 million. Included in the retrocession costs are 20 million dollars to cleanse the shuttle of any toxic substances, such as ammonia, monomethyl hydrazine and nitrogen tetroxide, an operation that requires partially disassembling the spacecraft.

Another eight to nine million go toward loading the enormous craft atop a Boeing 747 for delivery.

Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, which gave up on its bid for financial reasons, estimated the true installation costs for a museum to be some 80 million dollars.

The National Air and Space Museum plans to have Discovery replace the shuttle Enterprise at its Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center close to Dulles International Airport, Neal said. Its main building in central Washington is too small to house the giant spacecraft.

It will return Enterprise, the oldest shuttle of all, to NASA, which will transfer it to another museum.

Will Enterprise, which was never flown in space and was only used for tests, serve as a consolation prize?

"Oh no, it's still a prize. Enterprise has a very distinctive history," assured Neal, recalling the shuttle traveled to the Paris Air Show in 1983, where it was a "big sensation."

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Citation: Race is on for museums to host retired space shuttles (2010, May 27) retrieved 24 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2010-05-museums-host-space-shuttles.html

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